DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 413 148 RC 021 247

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TITLE	A Model for Rural School Consolidation: Making Sense of the Inevitable Result of School Reform.
PUB DATE	1997-09-00
NOTE	30p.; In: The Many Faces of Rural Education. Proceedings of the Annual NREA Convention (89th, Tucson, AZ, September 24-27, 1997); see RC 021 239.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Administrator Attitudes; *Change Strategies; *Community Involvement; Educational Change; *Educational Planning; Elementary Secondary Education; *Mergers; *Personnel Management; Rural Schools; *School District Reorganization; School Districts; Superintendents
IDENTIFIERS	*Oklahoma

ABSTRACT

Passage in 1989 of Oklahoma's education reform bill, H.B. 1017, provided encouragement and financial rewards for use of consolidation as a reform strategy, but this approach is often met with anxiety and hostility from stakeholders. In an effort to identify strategies that facilitate consolidation, semistructured interviews were conducted with the superintendents of 16 rural Oklahoma school districts that had participated in 8 voluntary consolidations. The superintendents discussed strategies used to enhance the consolidation process for teachers, parents and community, students, support staff, administrators, and board members, as well as strategies that proved unproductive. Thirteen successful strategies were identified. Addressing the number one staff issue--job security--all eight consolidated districts guaranteed the positions of administrators and support staff, while five new districts retained their entire teaching staff. Keeping staff informed and providing employee displacement compensation were other staff strategies. Maintaining all school sites greatly enhanced the consolidation process for students and community members; this was accomplished in six consolidations. Other student and community strategies included community meetings, media releases, focus on the student benefits of consolidation, and joint student-body activities. Administrative issues were addressed through preconsolidation administrative appointments, joint board meetings, extensive planning, and state assistance. Contains 25 references and 16 data tables. (SV)

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A Model for Rural School Consolidation: Making Sense of the Inevitable Result of School Reform

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A Model for Rural School Consolidation:
Making Sense of the Inevitable Result of School Reform

School consolidation has been part of the American education milieu for almost as long as there have been schools. Potter (1967) reported as early as 1874, that Quincy, Massachusetts began transporting students from small schools to large graded ones. Webster (1981) defined consolidation as the joining together into a whole, strengthening, or merging, "a public school formed by merging other schools" (p. 240). Isenberg and Taudien (1964) suggested that the most recent changes to the sturcture of rural schools began about 1935 when the nation was in the midst of a serious economic depression.

Although America is no longer a predominately rural nation, "the majority of its school districts are located in very small towns and rural areas" (Glass, 1992, p. ix). Overall, small districts, defined as those having fewer than 3,000 students, constitute approximately 75 percent of districts in the nation and provide an education for about 30 percent of the elementary and secondary school-age population (Schmuck and Schmuck, 1992). Fifty-one percent of all districts are both small and rural (ERIC, 1991; Schmuck and Schmuck, 1992).

"As rural and small schools are typically the target of school consolidation, the threat of school closures persists as perhaps the most important concern in many American rural communities" (DeYoung and Howley, 1992, p. 1). As early as 1874, smaller schools were merging into larger ones (Potter, 1967). In the 1930s "there were 128,000 school districts and over 238,000 schools in America. By 1980, the number of school districts had dropped to 16,000 and schools to 61,000" (DeYoung and Howley, 1992, p. 1). Chance (1994) reported that between March 1980 and March 1988, the number of rural farm children decreased by 25 percent from 1.6 million to 1.2 million.

Seal and Harmon (1995) suggested that "changing schools means changing the community and its culture" (p. 119). The schoolhouse is more than just a place for children to receive instruction; it is also a place for many adult activities, such as social gatherings, political rallies, and dances (DeYoung and Lawrence, 1995; Tyack, 1974). Benton (1962) stated that "consolidation is a subject most small, rural communities approach gingerly, if at all. Citizens have too much emotion invested in the local schoolhouse, the sports team, and the community's education heritage to do otherwise" (p. 1).

DeYoung and Lawrence (1995) indicated that school reformers throughout most of this century have attempted to create larger and more efficient schools. "School consolidations have been justified on two primary grounds: (a) the bigger is better philosophy, and (b) economic efficiency" (Migyanko, 1992, pp. 45-46). DeYoung and Howley (1992) suggested that state policymakers and educational professionals spearhead efforts to consolidate "as moves toward improving cost effectiveness or accountability" (p. 1). Economy of scale, curricular advantages, greater student opportunities, and better facilities are all arguments for consolidating the smaller schools (Chance and Deering, 1993; DeYoung and Howley, 1992; DeYoung and Lawrence, 1995; Link, 1971; Stern, 1994).

The consolidation of schools has played a major role in school reform. Consolidation as a reform strategy has recently been encouraged and financially rewarded in Oklahoma with the passage of H.B. 1017, yet it is often met with anxiety and hostility from stakeholders. Rural communities across Oklahoma fear a loss of identity without their schools. But consolidation is a reality that must be investigated whether it be voluntary or involuntary. This research was designed to collect information through semistructured interviews with selected Oklahoma superintendents who have experienced voluntary school consolidation. The data was then used to identify any strategies utilized by the rural superintendents

involved in this process which enhanced the voluntary consolidation of their schools.

The Study

Since the passage of H.B. 1017, Oklahoma's education reform bill, in November 1989, there have been 51 school consolidations reported in Oklahoma by the State Department of Education (1995). Nine of the consolidations were voluntary, that is, the districts merged free of local, state, or federal mandates to do so.

This study collected data from the use of semistructured interviews with the superintendents involved in eight of the voluntary school consolidations since H.B. 1017. One consolidation was not used because a superintendent involved in the process could not be found. The methodology required contrasting and comparing the data from both superintendents in each district involved in the consolidation. Other sources of data included researchers' notes, school board meeting minutes, newspaper articles, consolidation plans, and feasibility studies submitted by the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

All of the superintendents participating in the study were guaranteed anonymity and that no individual, school, or school district would be identified in any report of the research. In order to provide anonymity, fictitious names were provided so that the readers of this research might not tell where and from whom the data was collected (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The eight consolidations representing sixteen rural school districts are listed in Table I.

Table 1
The School Districts

Consolidation #1	*Superintendents*
Stony School District	Mrs. Peterson
Agewater School District	Mr. Alex
Consolidation #2	*Superintendents*
Tin Mill School District	Mr. Rich
Valley School District	Mr. Steen
Consolidation #3	*Superintendents*
Reid School District	Mr. Martin
Big Rock School District	Mr. Bates
Consolidation #4	*Superintendents*
Gerry School District	Mr. Burman
Nona School District	Mr. Taylor
Consolidation #5	*Superintendents*
Barley Heights School	Dr. Williams
Mabel School District	Mr. Walters
Consolidation #6	*Superintendents*
Bowman School District	Mr. Hoover
Fayeville School District	Mr. Stephens
Consolidation #7	*Superintendents*
Sentry School District	Mr. Myers
Andrew School District	Mr. Landry
Consolidation #8	*Superintendents*
Lyndale School District	Mr. Horton
Fittsview School District	Mrs. Earls

Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative researchers seek to make sense of personal stories told by participants (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). "They are also concerned with understanding behavior from the subject's own frame of mind" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 2). A phenomenological approach was utilized in order to better understand the meaning of the events and the interactions of the people involved in the consolidations (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Baden (1994) wrote that qualitative designs allow participants to talk in their own words and at their own level of understanding. The interview method was the primary tool of data

collection for this study. Researchers' notes, school board meeting minutes, newspaper articles, consolidation plans, and feasibility studies submitted by the State Department were also part of the data analyzed.

An interview guide was developed to lead the interviews and "offer the subject a chance to shape the content of the interview" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 92). As qualitative interviews vary in their degree of structure, Bogdan and Biklen (1992) contended:

> In keeping with the qualitative tradition of attempting to capture the subjects' own words and letting the analysis emerge, interview schedules and observation guides generally allow for open-ended responses and are flexible enough for the observer to note and collect data on unexpected dimensions of the topic (p. 77).

These questions were maintained as the central theme for each participant interview.

The validity of the interview questions was strengthened through the involvement of others in a content analysis (Holsti, 1969). First, the questions were sent to three University of Oklahoma professors for evaluation of content and construction. The process then involved soliciting input from three university professors in educational administration in other states who utilize qualitative research extensively. The third step included two Oklahoma superintendents experienced in school consolidation since H.B. 1017. They were given copies of the questions and asked to analyze them for clarity, appropriateness, and validity. All of the comments and suggestions from these experts in the field were used to improve the content of the interview questions, thus strengthening the validity of the questions (Holsti, 1969).

A pilot study was also conducted with an Oklahoma superintendent experienced in school consolidation since H. B. 1017. The semistructured interview

was conducted in a manner similar to the actual research interviews. The interview guide was followed and the interview was tape recorded and transcribed. This superintendent was not part of the final study.

During the semistructured interviews, the superintendents were listend to carefully and researchers tried to understand the perceptions of the participants (Wolcott, 1990). The goal was to understand the various superintendents' points of view (Borg and Gall, 1992). Transcriptions and other collected data were analyzed repeatedly over the course of several weeks to build inter- and intrarelater reliability (Bowers and Cartwright, 1988).

Summary of Findings

Various strategies utilized by Oklahoma superintendents in order to provide a more efficient, productive and less threatening consolidation process were identified through the data analysis of this study. Data was analyzed aruond seven research questions. These research questions provided the focus of the study during the collection of the data and during the content analysis.

Question 1: What strategies did the superintendents who have participated in voluntary school consolidation utilize to enhance the consolidation process for teachers?

Strategies that enhanced the consolidation process for teachers included guaranteed job security, teacher reassignments, an enhanced curriculum, faculty meetings, consolidation plan input, teacher displacement compensation, and community committee input. The strategies are identified in Table 2. Also identified are which consolidations saw the utilization of which strategies.

TABLE 2

STRATEGIES USED THAT ENHANCED THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS FOR TEACHERS

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Job Security	yes	yes/no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
Reassignments	yes	yes	yes		yes			
Enhanced Curriculum						yes		
Faculty Meetings	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes
Consolidation Plan Input				yes	yes			
Teacher Displacement Compensation			yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	
Community Committee Input					yes			

Question 2: What strategies did the superintendents who have participated in voluntary school consolidation utilize to enhance the consolidation process for parents and the community?

Nine strategies were identified through this study that enhanced the consolidation process for parents and the community. Community meetings, newspaper articles, keeping all sites open, input on the consolidation plan, and open transfer policies for students were all demonstrated. Other strategies included committee input, enhancement of the curriculum and student activities, and utilization of opinion polls and surveys. Table 3 outlines the strategies for the eight consolidations.

TABLE 3

STRATEGIES USED THAT ENHANCED THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS FOR PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Community Meetings	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Newspaper Articles	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Maintain All Sites	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no
Consolidation Plan Input	yes		yes	yes			yes	
Open Transfer	yes			yes				
Joint Board Meetings	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes		yes
Committee Input			yes				yes	yes
Enhanced Curriculum & Activities			yes	yes				yes
Opinion Poll/Survey			yes	yes		yes		yes

Question 3: What strategies did the superintendents who have participated in voluntary school consolidation utilize to enhance the consolidation process for the students?

Strategies which were utilized to enhance the voluntary consolidation process for students included expanded curricular and activity opportunities, consolidation plan input, surveys and/or opinion polls, joint student-body activities, committee input, open transfers, and enhanced facilities. Students were very involved in at least three of the eight consolidation processes. Table 4 has a complete outline of the strategies utilized to enhance the consolidations for students.

TABLE 4

STRATEGIES USED THAT ENHANCED THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS FOR STUDENTS

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Expanded Curricular and Activity Opportunities	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Consolidation Plan Input	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes
Opinion Poll/Survey								yes
Joint Student-body Activities	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	
Committee Input					yes		yes	
Open Transfer	yes	yes						yes
Enhanced Facilities	yes							

Question 4: What strategies did the superintendents who have participated in voluntary school consolidation utilize to enhance the consolidation process for the support staff?

Five strategies were identified that enhanced the consolidation process for the support staffs. Job security, maintaining all sites, staff meetings, job displacement compensation, and community committee input were all noted. Table 5 provides an outline of the strategies and which consolidations utilized which one.

TABLE 5

STRATEGIES USED THAT ENHANCED THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS FOR THE SUPPORT STAFF

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Job Security	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Maintain All Sites	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no
Staff Meetings	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Job Displacement Compensation			yes	yes	yes	yes		
Community Committee Input								yes

Question 5: What strategies did the superintendents who have participated in voluntary school consolidation utilize to enhance the consolidation process for the administrators?

Three strategies were utilized to enhance the consolidation process for administrators and were consistent across the eight consolidations. Four strategies were identified with three being evident in all eight of the consolidations. Those revealed in all eight consolidations were pre-consolidation administrative appointments, job security, and consolidation plan input. The fourth strategy, job displacement compensation, was revealed in three of the consolidations. Table 6 outlines the four strategies and the consolidations in which they were utilized.

TABLE 6

STRATEGIES USED THAT ENHANCED THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS FOR THE ADMINISTRATORS

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Pre-Consolidation Administrative Appointments	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Job Security	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Consolidation Plan Input	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Job Displacement Compensation				yes		yes	yes	

Question 6: What strategies did the superintendents who have participated in voluntary school consolidation utilize to enhance the consolidation process for the board members?

Eleven strategies were utilized within the eight consolidations to enhance the consolidation process for board members. Those most evident included joint board meetings, consolidation plans, community meetings, board member selection agreements, and advisement from the State Department of Education. Other strategies included creating a seven-member board, using outside advisement, community committee input, school tours, board retreats, and opinion polls or surveys. A complete outline of the strategies utilized with each consolidation is contained in Table 7.

TABLE 7

STRATEGIES USED THAT ENHANCED THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS FOR THE BOARD MEMBERS

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Joint Board Meetings	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Consolidation Plan	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Community Meetings	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Board Member Selection Agreements	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Seven-member Board	yes		yes					
State Department Advisement	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Other Advisement	yes		yes				yes	
Community Committee Input							yes	yes
School Tours				yes		yes		
Board Retreats			yes					
Opinion Poll/Survey			yes	yes		yes		yes

Question 7: What strategies for voluntary consolidation were not productive?

Nine strategies were identified during the consolidations that proved nonproductive. Three of the nonproductive strategies were indicated in more than one consolidation process. They were community meetings, closing schools, and the State Department feasibility studies. The remaining six nonproductive strategies were only identified in a single consolidation processes. These included forced consolidation, relocating or removing school memorabilia, relocating administrative furniture, seven-member boards, school name and mascot agreements, and job security for teachers. Table 8 outlines the nine nonproductive

strategies and the consolidation in which each was revealed. It should be noted that nonproductive strategies are situational, that is, a strategy proposed as not being productive during one consolidation could have been a very worthwhile process in another.

TABLE 8

STRATEGIES USED THAT WERE NOT PRODUCTIVE

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Forced Consolidation	yes							
Removing School Memorabilia		yes						
Relocating Administrative Furniture		yes						
Seven-member Board			yes					
Community Meetings					yes			yes
School Name and Mascot Agreements					yes			
School Closings						yes		yes
State Department Feasibility Study						yes	yes	
Job Security for Teachers							yes	

INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

The various strategies utilized by Oklahoma superintendents who participated in the eight voluntary consolidation efforts in Oklahoma since H.B. 1017 have been identified and documented through this research. Successful strategies are those utilized by a majority of the districts represented in this study.

For teachers, job security, faculty meetings, and teacher displacement compensation were the most significant strategies utilized in the eight consolidations. Teachers wanted to know that they would still have a job with the consolidated district, and if not, that they would be compensated for being displaced. Displacement compensation offered teachers eighty percent of their salary for one year plus the option to secure a position in another school district. Faculty meetings were utilized to keep the teachers informed and up-to-date on the consolidation process in their district. Table 9 outlines the most significant strategies utilized for teachers.

TABLE 9

SIGNIFICANT STRATEGIES USED TO ENHANCE
THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS FOR TEACHERS

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Job Security	yes	yes/no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
Faculty Meetings	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes
Teacher Displacement Compensation			yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	

Four strategies that enhanced the process for parents and the communities were most evident throughout the eight consolidations. Community meetings and joint board meetings were means to which superintendents and boards of education could communicate with the public. The meetings allowed board members to stay in touch with their constituents and served as vehicles for sharing information efficiently. Others experienced in school consolidation were able, through joint board meetings and community meetings, to discuss and answer questions for patrons. Newspaper articles, too, kept the patrons informed as to the consolidation plan and dates for board meetings, community meetings, and elections.

The closing of schools was an important issue for parents and the communities. Six of the eight consolidations were able to maintain all of the existing sites. Communities feared a loss of their populace and identity without their school. Table 10 illustrates the strategies that were most utilized for parents and the community.

TABLE 10

SIGNIFICANT STRATEGIES USED TO ENHANCE
THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS FOR PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Community Meetings	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Joint Board Meetings	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes		yes
Newspaper Articles	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Maintain All Sites	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no

Expanded opportunities, consolidation plan input, and joint student-body activities were most evident in enhancing the consolidation process for students. Expanded opportunities included more classes, especially higher-level courses, additional programs such as art and cheerleading, and enhanced athletics. Consolidation plan input allowed the students opportunities to select the school name, mascot, and school colors. Students worked on community committees or with other students. Joint student-body activities included visiting schools, meeting teachers, attending programs together, and planning events for the up-coming school year. Table 11 outlines any significant strategies utilized to enhance the consolidation process for students.

TABLE 11

SIGNIFICANT STRATEGIES USED TO ENHANCE
THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS FOR STUDENTS

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Expanded Curricular and Activity Opportunities	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Consolidation Plan Input	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes
Joint Student-body Activities	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes

Successful strategies that enhanced the consolidation process for the support staffs were job security, maintaining all sites, and staff meetings. In these small, rural schools the support staffs were treated much like other staff members. Their concerns were similar, also. The support staffs wanted to know they had a job with the consolidated school or how they would be compensated if a job was not available. Support staff displacement compensation was similar to the teachers'. The displaced employees were offered eighty percent of their salary for one year plus the option to secure other employment and still receive the payment. Staff meetings were utilized to inform the support personnel of the consolidation plan and the decisions made as it progressed. Table 12 indicates the strategies most utilized during the eight voluntary consolidations to enhance the process for the support staffs.

TABLE 12

SIGNIFICANT STRATEGIES USED TO ENHANCE
THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS FOR SUPPORT STAFFS

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Job Security	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Maintain All Sites	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no
Staff Meetings	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

Administrators were important during the consolidation process and three strategies that enhanced the process for them were significant during the eight consolidations. The strategies included pre-consolidation administrative appointments, job security, and consolidation plan input. Pre-consolidation administrative appointments enhanced organizational stability. The administrative appointments established a chain of command and eased decision-making issues. Job security was enhanced through pre-consolidation administrative appointments. Those administrators not accepting the positions offered them by the boards of education were compensated eighty percent of their salary for one year plus the option to secure other employment and still receive the payment. Input on the plans to consolidate was a significant strategy utilized to enhance the consolidation process for the administrators. Teacher placement, curriculum programs, and student activities were just some of the decisions administrators helped to make. Table 13 identifies significant strategies which were utilized for administrators.

TABLE 13

SIGNIFICANT STRATEGIES USED TO ENHANCE
THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS FOR ADMINISTRATORS

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Pre-Consolidation Administrative Appointments	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Job Security	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Consolidation Plan Input	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

Successful strategies utilized to enhance the consolidation process for board members included five that were evident in all eight consolidations. Joint board meetings, consolidation plans, community meetings, pre-consolidation board member selection agreements, and State Department advisement were significant strategies throughout the voluntary consolidations. Joint board meetings and community meetings were means of sharing information and discussing issues with the patrons of the communities. State Department personnel and others experienced in school consolidations were often in attendance. Pre-consolidation board member selection agreements enhanced decision-making during the consolidations, as well as, enhanced organizational stability. The board approved consolidation plans provided direction and focus for the board members when making consolidation process decisions. Table 14 outlines the strategies that were most significant in enhancing the consolidation process for board members.

TABLE 14

SIGNIFICANT STRATEGIES USED TO ENHANCE
THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS FOR BOARD MEMBERS

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Joint Board Meetings	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Consolidation Plan	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Community Meetings	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Board Member Selection Agreements	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
State Department Advisement	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

Strategies that were not productive were situational and dependent upon many variables. Leadership styles of the boards and superintendents, politics within the schools and communities, and the demographics of the communities and the districts all played significant roles in the consolidation processes. A strategy indicated as nonproductive by one superintendent may have been essential in another consolidation. Those strategies presented as not productive included forced consolidations, removing school memorabilia, relocating administrative furniture, creating seven-member boards, community meetings, school name and mascot agreements, closing schools, the State Department's feasibility studies, and job security for teachers. Three of the strategies presented as nonproductive were

TABLE 15

SIGNIFICANT STRATEGIES USED THAT WERE NOT PRODUCTIVE

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Community Meetings					yes			yes
School Closings						yes		yes
State Department Feasibility Study						yes	yes	

evident in more than one consolidation. These included community meetings, closing schools, and the feasibility studies submitted by the State Department of Education. Table 15 illustrates the strategies reported from more than one consolidation as being nonproductive.

CONCLUSIONS

School consolidation has been a tool for school improvement for over 100 years (Rosenfield and Sher, 1977). It will in all probability continue to be encouraged and financially rewarded by state and local governments. Yet, patrons fear a loss of community identity without their school. This study has identified thirteen successful strategies that, if implemented appropriately, can facilitate rural school consolidation and enhance the overall process for teachers, parents and the community, students, support staffs, administrators, and board members. Table 16 identifies the thirteen strategies and the voluntary consolidations in which they were utilized.

Job security was the number one issue for teachers, administrators, and support staffs in each of the voluntary consolidations studied. Administrators and

support staffs were guaranteed their positions in all eight of the consolidations, while five of the new districts retained their entire teaching staff. In those that reduced teachers, the superintendents indicated that apprising teachers of their future early in the process was most advantageous. Also, placing those teachers' names hired by the consolidated district in school board minutes enhanced the process.

TABLE 16

STRATEGIES THAT FACILITATE
AND ENHANCE THE CONSOLIDATION PROCESS

	Consolidation 1	Consolidation 2	Consolidation 3	Consolidation 4	Consolidation 5	Consolidation 6	Consolidation 7	Consolidation 8
Job Security	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
Employee Displacement Compensation			yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	
Staff Meetings	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes
Maintain All Sites	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no
Community Meetings	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Media Releases	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Expanded Curriculum and Activity Opportunities	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Joint Student-body Activities	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	
Pre-Consolidation Administrative Appointments	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Joint Board Meetings	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Consolidation Plan	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
State Department Advisement	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Board Member Selection Agreements	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

Employee displacement compensation further enhanced the consolidation process. The superintendents in five of the consolidations indicated that displaced employees were offered eighty percent of their salary for one year plus the opportunity to secure another job. This strategy may have relieved the personal anxiety felt by those employees losing their jobs due to the consolidation.

In seven consolidations staff meetings were utilized to enhance the process. Teachers, support people, and administrators should be kept informed. The most efficient means may be through faculty meetings in which employees have an opportunity to ask questions. Communication proved vital to the success of the consolidation process.

Maintaining all of the sites was another strategy that greatly enhanced the consolidation process. Patrons, students, and staff members all have a viable stake in maintaining the school. While only six of the eight consolidations were able to keep all of their sites open, this strategy enhances the process for most stakeholders and is a key element to a successful consolidation process.

Data from all eight of the consolidations studied revealed that community meetings were utilized to enhance the consolidation process. Community meetings are a productive means of sharing information with interested patrons. Open meetings allow two-way communication and an opportunity for community members to ask questions of school officials. Accurate information is vital to a consolidation process and this strategy can help ensure that parents are well informed and that the information they are receiving is factual.

Media releases were useful in all eight of the consolidations studied. Newspaper articles were the most common form of media releases utilized, but radio and television were also used in unique situations. The media is crucial to a successful school consolidation. The timely dispersion of accurate, factual information can calm the nerves of stakeholders anxious over what effects a

change in their school may bring. The media can be utilized to report consolidation plans, meeting agendas, dates and times, election information, and/or letters of support through editorials. Letters from supportive patrons can also be published in the newspaper to further enhance the consolidation process.

The primary focus of school consolidation should be to expand the curricular and activity opportunities for students. Superintendents involved in all eight of the consolidations cautioned others that if the decisions made during a consolidation process are not made for the children, then they are made for the wrong reasons. Immediate financial advantages were not necessarily gained by all of the consolidated districts, but every district expanded the curricular offerings and enhanced the activity opportunities for their students. Consolidations which focus on the students are difficult to dispute. Stating these views early facilitates the process.

Joint student-body activities can greatly facilitate a consolidation process. Attitudes of students are a major influence on parents and the community. Through joint activities students begin to feel more relaxed with new teachers, administrators, and peers. Such activities may include athletic ventures, student council meetings, dances, academic teams, assemblies, and/or meals together. Superintendents participating in this study indicated that students were the least of their problems during the consolidations and that activities designed to bring them together were viewed as one of the primary reasons for success in this area.

There are several reasons that pre-consolidation administrative appointments are important to a consolidation process. Job security for administrators is one, but beyond that, organizational stability, an established chain of command, and the essential beginnings of developing a vision for the new district are vital. Leadership within the organization should be announced early in the process in order to provide stakeholders the confidence that the consolidation will

work. Pre-consolidation administrative appointments were utilized in all eight of the consolidations studied.

Joint board meetings were also utilized in all of the consolidations. Joint board meetings provided many opportunities that facilitated the process. Board members were able to address issues and concerns together. Others experienced in school consolidation advised the joint groups, and patrons were allowed opportunity to voice their opinions through joint school board meetings. Other agenda areas covered during the meetings included tours of facilities, opportunity for State Department advisement, student input, and joint executive sessions. Joint board meetings can provide accurate information to patrons and are critical to a successful consolidation process.

A well written consolidation plan, approved by both boards, can enhance a consolidation process. All of the superintendents involved in this study helped develop a plan, had it approved by both boards, and focused on it during the consolidation process. The consolidation plans provided direction for school officials and eased their decision-making. Fears of stakeholders fueled from not knowing what may happen next were alleviated by the announcements of the consolidation plans. Consolidation plans made available to patrons and then carried through as written are most effective.

State Department assistance was evident in all eight of the voluntary consolidations studied. Feasibility studies, participation in board meetings, and consolidation plan input were some of the means by which the State Department of Education facilitated the consolidations. State Department personnel also attended staff meetings and community meetings. The State Department's feasibility study addressed personnel issues, transportation needs, and the financial status of the districts. Federal programs, such as child nutrition, special education, and Title I,

were also outlined in the studies. Feasibility studies provided a projected outline of the consolidated districts internal programs. No district should pursue a consolidation without utilizing the expertise and experience offered by the State Department of Education.

In the eight consolidations studied, pre-consolidation board member selection agreements were utilized. The means by which the board members were selected differed, but the strategy of naming the board members of the new district before the consolidation election remained constant. This strategy is important to the stability of the organization, the efficiency of decision-making, and the confidence in the overall process. Pre-selected board members provide an avenue for constituents to voice their concerns and support for the consolidation. Naming the new board members should be done early in the process, allowing them time to appoint their chief administrator and then support his efforts in providing a successful merger of the school districts.

School consolidation continues as the most important concern for many rural communities and rural schools in America (DeYoung and Howley, 1992). The thirteen strategies outlined in Table 16 were successfully utilized in eight selected voluntary consolidations in Oklahoma since the passage of H.B. 1017 to enhance the consolidation process. These strategies, if implemented appropriately, can alleviate the fears of stakeholders and provide for a more collegial, efficient school consolidation. The availability of reliable strategies which enhance the consolidation process and the assurance that these strategies have been researched and documented provides some relief to an otherwise stressful experience. Although consolidation is an outcome of many school reform efforts, how much it has actually improved schools is still being debated. However, once the decision to consolidate

has been made, the strategies identified by this study could play a major role in providing an efficient, collegial, and productive process. "Win-Win" strategies are difficult to construct, but in the case of school consolidation, it can be done. This research provides useful guidance for any rural superintendent who undertakes a school consolidation. Hopefully, if a consolidation does take place, whether it be voluntary or involuntary, the ultimate beneficiaries are the students of the districts involved in the consolidation. And of that, only time will tell.

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